

CRM

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U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Cultural Resources

The Roving National Historic Landmark—*Jeremiah O'Brien*

A Successful Public-Private Partnership

Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of D-Day

Kevin J. Foster

A crew of veteran seamen, all National Park Service volunteers, sailed the 441-foot-long, National Historic Landmark World War II liberty ship *Jeremiah O'Brien* across the Atlantic to the shores of Normandy. *O'Brien* is the only U.S. ship that took part in the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944, to make the trip back to the invasion beaches for the commemorative activities held June 5–7 this year. Two other veteran merchant ships, the victory ship *Lane Victory* from Los Angeles and the liberty ship *John Brown* from Baltimore prepared for the voyage but were unable to make the journey across the Atlantic.

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The National Center for Preservation Technology and Training

Cover photos: Jeremiah O'Brien on the San Francisco Bay. Photo by John W. Borden. Inset: Volunteers performing restoration work. National Park Service photo by Richard Frear.

Statements of fact and views are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect an opinion or endorsement on the part of the editors, the CRM advisors and consultants, or the National Park Service. Send articles, news items, and correspondence to the Editor, CRM (400), U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Cultural Resources, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; (202-343-3395).

Jeremiah O'Brien

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The survival of *Jeremiah O'Brien* is a remarkable achievement by a partnership of government agencies and a dedicated group of Volunteers-In-Parks. The ship was built in 1943, one of more than 2,700 liberty ships of the same design, and made nine voyages carrying troops and war material to Europe and 11 round trips between the Normandy beachhead and the United Kingdom. Moth-balled in February 1946, *O'Brien* was preserved in the Suisun Bay National Defense Reserve Fleet near Benicia, CA.

Following *O'Brien's* listing in the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, a group of veteran liberty ship sailors formed the National Liberty Ship Memorial, Inc., and began efforts to save what was by then the last surviving unmodified liberty ship. In 1980, *Jeremiah O'Brien* traveled to Pier 3, at Fort Mason, San Francisco, her home berth as an operational memorial.

The ship is operated as a partnership between two federal agencies and the Memorial. *O'Brien* is owned by the Maritime Administration and is on long-term charter to the National Park Service. NPS in turn has formed a cooperative agreement with the Memorial which allows occasional steaming within San Francisco Bay and provides other services to protect and interpret the ship. The Memorial provides the bulk of the work involved in administration, restoration, preservation, and presentation of this historic ship to the public.

O'Brien is preserved as a merchant marine memorial and operated as a museum ship. She has proved to be in the best shape of the surviving World War II emergency fleet, partly because of the unique public-private partnership that maintains and displays her. On January 14, 1986, Secretary of the Interior Donald P. Hodel recognized the careful restoration work and thousands of hours of volunteer labor when he proclaimed *O'Brien* a National Historic Landmark.

National Park Service Liberty Ship Goes to Drydock at San Francisco



The last American Liberty Ship from World War II, the SS *Jeremiah O'Brien*, in drydock for restoration and painting before being placed on public display at Fort Mason in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. The ship is a monument to the two million men and women who built and sailed 2,751 of them during the dark days of World War II when they supplied an embattled free world. The 441-foot freighter is part of the historic fleet of the National Maritime Museum of the National Park Service. Photo by Richard Frear.

In 1992, when *O'Brien* needed hull maintenance and work on the propeller shaft, San Francisco Maritime National Historic Park provided \$400,000 from their meager museum fleet budget to complete the work. Congress has also made several special appropriations for *O'Brien* in the last five years.

A cherished dream of many people involved in the preservation of *Jeremiah O'Brien* and the two other extant World War II cargo ships, was to make a commemorative voyage to Europe for the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings. Last year Congress funded part of the preparation for the commemorative voyage by transferring two old ships for scrapping to each of the three historic ship preservation organizations hoping to send their ships to Normandy. The proceeds from the scrapped ships paid for the repairs needed to make the trip.

(Foster—continued on page 4)



Jeremiah O'Brien at Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service. Photo by Richard Frear.

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The Maritime Administration and the National Park Service worked together to help make the voyage possible. The charter was modified to transfer responsibility for a safe voyage back to the Maritime Administration,

the D-Day commemorative activities. San Francisco Maritime NHP Interpretive Ranger Julie Arlinghaus arrived later to provide historical and French language interpretation during ship visits to Cherbourg, Rouen, and Le Havre, France.

The participation of this historic ship and her veteran

crew is among the most remarkable events of this tremendous commemoration, but it will not be the only one. Tens of thousands of veterans visited France during the month, including one group of paratroops who recreated the historic parachute landing that they made 50 years ago. The heads of state of at least eight of the World War II Allied nations, including President Bill Clinton, participated in the commemorative activities aboard the warships of as many nations. Pride of place went to *O'Brien* as the only merchant ship amidst this mighty naval armada.

The National Liberty Ship Memorial plans to return the ship to the United States this winter. The National Park Service is proud to have helped to support the volunteers

of *Jeremiah O'Brien* in preserving this remarkable ship and making this historic voyage.

Kevin J. Foster is Maritime Historian of the National Park Service.

For additional reading on the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of WWII, see CRM, Vol. 14, No. 8 and Vol. 15, No. 8



The *O'Brien* at her home berth, Fort Mason, San Francisco, CA (1984). Photo by Joanie Morgan.

Inset photo by Richard Frear.

while maintaining the Park Service workman's compensation protections for the Volunteers-In-Parks crew. The Liberty Ship Memorial and several other groups provided funding for the voyage, a certified crew, fuel, port and dock charges and other needs to allow the voyage to be made at no cost to the government.

On June 6, the ship and her sailors were once again where they were 50 years earlier. During the Allied invasion which freed Europe from Nazi tyranny, *O'Brien* carried 11 ship loads of military goods across the English Channel. Then, as now, *Jeremiah O'Brien* was a survivor despite heavy odds.

Jeremiah O'Brien participated in the colossal international memorial commemoration held on June 6, with representatives of most of the Allied nations participating. The veteran liberty ship joined ships of the other Allied nations in a naval review at Southampton, England before leaving on June 5 for the Normandy beachhead. On June 6, the fleet took part in commemorations at Pointe du Hoc and Omaha Beach and on June 7, *O'Brien* demonstrated ship to shore transfer of a vintage cargo using landing craft and amphibious trucks (called DUKWs).

The National Park Service sent two representatives to participate in portions of the voyage. Maritime Historian Kevin Foster represented the Service on board *O'Brien* for